The Mormon Concept of God

Blake T. Ostler

The conflict between the God of religious worship and the god of philosophical inquiry has plagued Judeo-Christian theology since the union of Greek philosophy with Hebrew religion in the first centuries of the Christian era. The conflict in this union arises from the most basic religious needs. In response to our finitude, we refuse to worship anything less than the absolute, yet we employ modes of worship such as prayer that presuppose a personal, finite being as the object of our devotion. Understandably, this conflict remains even in Mormon thought. For while Mormonism espouses an unrefined finitist theology, it is tempted to return to the Catholic/Protestant understanding of an absolute God, against which it rebelled in its origins. The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate that such an absolutist concept of God entails insuperable difficulties while the finitist concept of God avoids these problems and is more adequate to the Judeo-Christian understanding in general and essential to the Mormon revelation in particular.

The very act of worship may appear paradoxical. Kneeling before deity symbolizes both an intimate I-Thou relationship and the infinite distance interposed between God's infinite being and our finite, precarious existence. Theologians of traditional Catholic/Protestant theology insist that God must be absolute to be the adequate object of faith. If God were conditioned in any sense (thus in some respects finite), he could not be trusted unconditionally. For what is conditional may fail us if the conditions happen to be unfavorable.[1] Theologians since Anselm have insisted that God must be the greatest conceivable being, for anything less is not worthy of our devotion, awe, and re-

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BLAKE T. OSTLER, who has a degree in philosophy and psychology from Brigham Young University, is now a law student and a member of the Law Review *staff at the University of Utah.*

[1] Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Press, 1948), p. 22.

spect.[2] More recently, Paul Tillich realized that the truly absolute must be beyond predication; it is even improper for one to say that "God exists." The only assertion that one can properly make of God is that he (it?) is "being itself." Being itself is our "ultimate concern," and worship of a person, even one denoted "God," is idolatry for Tillich.[3] Theologians have preferred the absolute to the personal because, as Sterling McMurrin observed, "their god must have the whole world in his hands for they do not propose to take their problems to a god who has problems of his own." [4]

It is absurd, however, for persons to take their problems to an absolute being who literally could not care less about human affairs, a being to whom human existence could not possibly add or have meaning. Indeed, I believe that Christianity is based on the fundamental premise that *our problems are God's problems.* The theologians have never successfully bamboozled the masses into praying to the God of theology. In prayer, we seek a God who is responsive, loving, and personal — and rightly so, for personality, however illusive its definition, is the highest attribute we know.[5] Yet the absolute cannot possess a single attribute of personality, for as Karl Barth noted, the absolute is "Totally Other Than" persons.[6]

The absolute necessarily possesses the qualities by which it is characterized unconditionally and perfectly. Traditionally, the absolute is defined as unrelated (and therefore as transcending interpersonal relationships); as impassive (and therefore incapable of compassion); as immutable (and therefore unchanging in response to our needs and petitions); as "Pure Act" (and therefore untouched by influences); as timeless (and therefore incapable of acting or being acted upon). Hence, notwithstanding innumerable attempts by theologians to understand the living God of Sinai in terms of impersonal absolutes derived from Greek metaphysics, a person seeking to enter into a relationship with deity cannot consistently maintain that God is absolute in the classical sense.

It is precisely here, in Mormonism's understanding of the relationship of God to persons, that its greatest contribution to religion can be made. Herein also lies its greatest philosophical strength. Although Mormonism lacks a systematic theology, it affirms at least a few remarkably coherent propositions about the nature of God, mortals, and the universe. In contrast to the unrelated and unconditioned absolute of traditional theology, the Mormon deity is related to and hence conditioned by an eternal environment which, because it is not totally his creation, is not absolutely subject to divine fiat.

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[2] Anselm, "Monologium" Ch. 4 and "Proslogium" 2 in *St. Anselm, Basic Writings*, trans. S. N. Deane (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court Press, 1966), Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part 1, Questions 2, 3.

[3] Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Press, 1948), p. 172.

[4] Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965), p. 139.

[5] W. H. Reade, *The Christian Challenge to Philosophy* (London: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1951), p. 125.

[6] Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox, 1960), p. 139.

The importance of this fundamental departure from traditional theology can hardly be overstated. In contrast to the static, timeless, and immutable *Being* of scholasticism, the God of Mormon revelation is a dynamic being among beings involved in the process of time, who intervenes in history to bring order out of chaos and value out of discord. In contrast to the self-sufficient and solitary absolute who creates *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), the Mormon God did not bring into being the ultimate constituents of the cosmos — neither its fundamental matter nor the space/time matrix which defines it. Hence, unlike the Necessary Being of classical theology who alone could not *not* exist and on which all else is contingent for existence, the personal God of Mormonism confronts uncreated realities which exist of metaphysical necessity. Such realities include inherently self-directing selves (intelligences), primordial elements (mass/energy), the natural laws which structure reality, and moral principles grounded in the intrinsic value of selves and the requirements for their growth and happiness. Because of these fundamental assertions, Mormonism is in a far better position than orthodox theology to explain how God may be both the adequate object of faith and the intimate Thou encountered in prayer. However, Mormons have rarely appreciated the strength of their doctrine of God, nor have they realized how essentially their view differs from Catholic/Protestant theology.

This essay employs the tools of philosophical analysis to examine the meaning of Mormon assumptions about the nature of God. The major assumption of this philosophical approach is that a proposition like "X created a perfectly round square" doesn't suddenly make sense simply because "God" is substituted for "X." A collection of meaningless words is meaningless even if God is the subject of the predicate. While there is much that we do not and cannot understand about God, our ignorance does not give us license to talk nonsense. Intellectual integrity demands that we face the implications of our beliefs. Hence, this essay treats the logical implications of various concepts Mormons have proposed concerning God's omniscience, omnipotence, and the adequate object of worship.

Omniscience

Concepts of Free-Will

The idea that God is all-knowing, or omniscient, is essential to the Judeo-Christian concept of God. The Hebrew-Christian scripture is replete with statements affirming God's knowledge of all things and predictions of future events. Passages in the Old and New Testaments do not give definitional statements of God's knowledge, however, and I believe it is a mistake to treat them as such. From the time of Origen and Augustine, the two greatest thinkers in the Christian tradition, theologians have confronted problems which arise if God knows everything. What is the point of prayer if God already knows what is best for us and is committed to bringing it about? How can human actions be free if they are determined beforehand?

In the history of Christian thought, a controversy developed between those who emphasized God's omnipotence and omniscience at the expense of human

freedom, such as Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, and those who emphasized human freedom and moral responsibility despite God's knowledge and power, such as Pelagius, Luis de Molina, and Arminius.[7] These conflicts in Christian doctrine have led to various ideas of human freedom and divine foreknowledge. The problem of reconciling human free-agency with divine foreknowledge depends upon the particular idea of freedom espoused. Those who insist on God's absoluteness have generally adopted a weakened form of human freedom compatible with determinism. The most thorough work on free will is Jonathan Edward's *Freedom of the Will*, an impressive work in the Calvinist tradition demonstrating that if free will is considered as the ability to do what one pleases but not necessarily to please as one pleases, then foreknowledge and free-agency are compatible.[8] The problem for such thinkers is not the incompatibility of free-agency and divine foreknowledge but the problem of evil and whether such an idea of freedom is a sound base for moral responsibility.

Traditional theology has often come perilously close to denying moral responsibility altogether as a result of its absolutistic emphasis. For example, the Augustinian doctrine of prevenient grace (the notion that man can will only evil unless grace irresistibly turns his will to God) denies man any moral responsibility whatsoever, including the responsibility of initiating a redeeming faith in Christ. This doctrine, defended by Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, was logically associated with the notions of original sin and predestination.[9] In the doctrine of prevenient grace, observed Sterling McMurrin, "Christian orthodoxy took its stand on a principle that guaranteed the utter moral and spiritual

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[7] Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, Bk. 5, Chs. 9–11; and *De Libero Arbitrio Voluntatis*, Bk. 3, Ch. 3; Martin Luther observes, "If we believe it to be true that God foreknows and foreordains all things; that He cannot be deceived or obstructed in His foreknowledge and predestination; and that nothing happens but at His will (which reason itself is compelled to grant); then, on reason's own testimony, there can be no 'free-will' in man, or angel, or in any creature." *De Servo Arbitrio*, in J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston, *Luther, On the Bondage of the Will* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1957), pp. 784–86; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (London: Westminster Press, 1961) 3.13.6: "Since God foresees future events only by reason of the fact that he decreed that they take place, they vainly raise a quarrel over foreknowledge, when it is clear that all things take place rather by his determination and bidding." Pelagius, *Pro Libero Arbitrio* Chs. 10–14; Luis De Molina, *Liberi Arbitrii cum Gratiae Donis . . . Concordia* 6; Arminius, *Opera: Declaratio Sentimentii* Bk. 1, 247.

[8] According to Edwards, freedom is "the power, opportunity, or advantage, that anyone has, to do as he pleases. Or in other words, his being free from hindrance or impediment in the way of doing, or conducting in any respect, as he wills." See Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of President Edwards*, ed. B. Franklin (New York: Burt Franklin, 1968), p. 152. In contrast, de Molina maintains: "That agent is free which can act and refrain from action or can do one thing while being able to do its opposite." *Liberi Arbitrii cum Gratiae Donis*, p. 14.

[9] Augustine, *De Predestinatione* 100.107; *De Corroptione et Gratia* 14; *Enchiridion* 100.2; In *De Gratiae et Libero Arbitrio*, Augustine explains that before the fall Adam was in the position of *posse non peccare*, able not to sin. After the fall, however, mankind is in the position of *non posse non peccare*, unable to not sin. We can do no good unless we are freed from our bondage to sin by God's grace, which returns us to Adam's state of being able to not sin. He states, however, that God turns the wills whenever he wants to and the will cannot resist God's grace. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Qu. 23, Art. 5; Luther, *De Servo Arbitrio*, 614–20; Calvin, Institutes, Bk. 2, ch. 1.

impotence of man as a necessary corollary of its absolutistic concept of God." [10]

Mormonism especially reflects the Arminian revolt against Calvinism, emphasizing human freedom and individual responsibility for salvation. Though man is dependent on Christ's atonement in an essential way, Mormonism rejects every form of predestination and reprobation and repudiates irresistible grace and arbitrary election. Mormonism espouses the stronger Arminian idea of freedom of choice among genuine alternatives, the freedom of choice between good and evil. Man is not only free to choose evil in accordance with his depraved character as Augustine maintained, but he is free to desire the good and to freely change his character. Such a choice, if genuine, is undetermined in advance.

However, when freedom is conceived in this stronger way a major problem arises if God foresees precisely what must happen. For if I am morally responsible for an action, I must also be free to refrain from doing that action. But if God knows what my action is before I do it, then it is not genuinely possible for me to do otherwise. For it cannot be the case that God knows Jones will rob a 7-11, for example, and that Jones in fact refrain from robbing that 7-11. Because divine foreknowledge is necessarily infallible (indeed, any true knowledge is infallible), any proposition about the content of divine knowledge entails a logical truth and precludes all other possibilities. The statement, "God knows that Jones will rob that 7-11 on 8 August 1995," logically entails that Jones will rob that 7-11 on that date. Hence, Jones is not free *not* to do as God knows he will, in fact, do. Hence, Jones is not morally free.

The conclusion in the above argument logically follows from its premises.[11] If the premises are accepted as sound, then foreknowledge and free-agency in the stronger sense of freedom of alternative choices are not logically compatible. Such notables as Augustine, Origen, and Elder James E. Talmage have attacked this form of argument. They observed that God's knowledge of the future does not *cause* future events to happen; rather, future events give rise to God's foreknowledge.[12] To the argument of the Pelagians that without

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[10] McMurrin, *Theological Foundations*, p. 70.

[11] Stated formally:

1. If I am free with respect to X, then I have a genuine option to do or refrain from doing X.
2. If an option is genuine (i.e, not merely apparent), then both doing and refraining from doing X must be logically possible.
3. God exists and has foreknowledge (i.e., for all X, if X, then God knows that X).
4. Whatever God knows (infallibly believes) is true.
5. Hence, if God believes that I will do X, then it is analytic that I will do X (3, 4).
6. If it is analytic that I will do X, then refraining from doing X is not logically possible (5).
7. Hence, I do not have a genuine option to do or refrain from doing X (2, 3, 6).
8. Hence, I am not free with respect to any morally significant action X (1, 2, 7).

[12] Augustine, tran. Marcus Dods, *De Civitate Dei*, Bk. 5, Ch. 10. "Our wills, therefore, *exist as wills* and do themselves whatever we do by willing, and which would not be done if we were unwilling. . . . It is not the case, therefore, that because God foreknew what would be in the power of our wills, there is for that reason nothing in the power of our wills. . . . Therefore, we are by no means compelled, either, retaining the prescience of God, to take

freedom to choose among genuine alternatives of good and evil there is no genuine free will, Augustine responded that whatever is willed is willed *freely* and that God's foreknowledge of this willing makes it no less free.[13] Jonathan Edwards demonstrated to his Arminian contemporaries that the *power* to conduct oneself in accordance with one's desires is compatible with the idea that one did an action while having power to refrain from doing it. The mere fact that God foreknows this action, argued Edwards, does not entail that one is powerless not do to it.[14]

The account of free will given by Augustine and Edwards, however, fails to provide a meaningful concept of freedom. If the idea of freedom is to have any significant meaning, then the phrase "I did X *freely*" must add something to the phrase "I did X." The crux of the matter is simply this: in every instance where it can be said that I had the power to do other than I in fact did, if one adds the proposition of God's foreknowledge, I could have done otherwise only *had God's foreknowledge been different* — but with this assertion we must retract the proposition and replace it with *could not have done other-*

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away the freedom of the will, or, retaining the freedom of the will, to deny that He is prescient of future things." Origen, *Peri Euches* (On Prayer), Bk. 8, Chs. 3–4: "And among all the things God foreordains in accordance with what He has seen concerning each deed of our freedom, there has been foreordained according to merit for each motion of our freedom what will meet it from providence and still cohere with the chain of future events. And so, *God's foreknowledge is not the cause of everything that will come to be, even of our freedom when we are made active by our own impulse.* . . . Our individual freedom is known to Him and consequently foreseen by Him . . . and what He wills him to have is decided beforehand." James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Winchester, Mass.: University Press, 1915), p. 28, note 1: "Can it be said that a father's foreknowledge is a cause of the son's sinful life? . . . [God] foresees the future as a state which naturally and surely will be; not as one which must be because He has arbitrarily willed that it shall be."

[13] Augustine, *De Libero Arbitrio Volantatis*, Bk. 3, Ch. 3 "We do not deny that God foreknows all that is to be, and that notwithstanding we may will what we will. For when he foreknows our will, it will be that very will that He foreknows. It will therefore be a will, because His foreknowledge is of a will. Nor can it be a will if it is not in our power." In distinction from a power of alternative choice, Augustine taught that the will is free when it acts purely from within itself and is not compelled to act from without. "No man is compelled by the power of God to evil or good; but that he wills the good is a grace of God." *Contra duas epistolas Pelagius*, Bk. 1, Ch. 2: "The Pelagians say that man's nature, which was made with free will, is sufficient to keep us from all sin, and to fulfil all righteousness; and that this is the grace of God, that we were so made that we could do this by our own will." Augustine, *De gestis contra Pelagius*. Pelagius insisted that men would be saved or damned by virtue of their own sins and not that of Adam because Adam's sin affected only Adam. Pelagius' ideas were condemned in a council at Carthage in A.D. 412. Mormonism is a modern-day Pelagianism of sorts.

[14] Edwards's *Works*, pp. 185–97. Arminius believed that the divine decrees were not absolute but conditional upon the exercise of free-will. Arminius claimed that the atonement made man free to choose good from evil, and that salvation depended upon man's free acceptance of grace. Arminius, *Opera: Declaratio sentimentii*, 16. Mormonism was especially influenced by the Arminian ideas of freedom and salvation. The idea of freedom as alternative choce was stated masterfully by Lehi in the Book of Mormon: "The Messiah cometh in the fullness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall. *And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon* . . . men are free according to the flesh . . . to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity of the devil." (2 Ne. 2:26–27, italics added); see also 2 Ne. 10:23; Hela. 14:30–31.

wise, for God's foreknowledge is not different. This power to do otherwise is meaningless in the context of God's foreknowledge. "Willing" is not synonymous with "willing freely," for a free will entails choice among alternatives that are genuinely open. An alternative that can never be chosen is not genuine; it is mere appearance.

The answer given by Origen, Augustine, and Talmage fails to reconcile the problem of foreknowledge and free-agency because causation is neither mentioned nor implied in the premises of my argument above. The problem is not that God's knowledge *causes* me to will in a given way. The argument does not assert that acts are coerced by causes or anything else; it merely asserts that given God's foreknowledge, things occur as God knows they will *no matter what*. The problem is not one of determinism, or the notion that all events including human volitions are necessitated by antecedent causes. Rather the issue is one of fatalism, the notion that future events are inevitable. The fatalist asserts merely that of all the things that happen in the world, none are avoidable. They never were. Some of them only seemed so.[15] Human will is no match for such inexorable fate. If God knows the future precisely, then the future is fixed and so are human actions.

Elder Talmage also attempted to resolve the problem of foreknowledge and free-agency by an analogy suggesting that because parents can often accurately predict the actions of their children without necessitating fatalism, then so can God.[16] There are two problems with this solution. First, the analogy breaks down at the most crucial point of similarity. While the "knowledge" a parent has of his/her children does not suggest fatalism because the parent could be (indeed at times is) wrong, the foreknowledge of God entails fatalism because it is necessarily infallible. God cannot be surprised if he has absolute foreknowledge. Second, the logical implication of the analogy is that our future actions can be predicted without error on the basis of our past actions, that our character is so determined that we could not possibly change. The analogy is based on a hidden premise of soft-determinism, the notion that our choices are determined by our character and our character is determined by causal antecedents.

The soft-determinist attempts to solve the problem by rejecting the stronger concept of freedom (categorical or contra-causal freedom) and adopting a weaker form of freedom as the absence of external coercion.[17] Though Jones

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[15] Richard Taylor, *Metaphysics*, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1974), p. 65. Boethius saw the problem more clearly: "I cannot agree with the argument by which some people believe that they can solve the problem [of foreknowledge and free-will]. . . . For they say that it is not necessary that things should happen because they are foreseen, but only that things that will happen be foreseen, *as though the problem were whether divine Providence is the cause of the necessity of future events.* . . . Nevertheless, it is necessary either that things which are going to happen be foreseen by God, or that what God foresees will in fact happen, and either way the freedom of the human will is destroyed." *De Consolatione Philosophiae Prose III.*

[16] Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, p. 28, n. 2.

[17] This notion of freedom is often termed "hypothetical freedom" because the alternative choices are in reality never exercised, but are only hypothetically possible. Such a notion

cannot choose otherwise given his character, Jones is free if he could have chosen otherwise *had he so chosen*. In other words, Jones is free to the extent that he is not externally constrained or impeded from doing as he desires to do. This concept of freedom is consistent with God's foreknowledge, for it does not require the possibility of choice among alternatives that are genuinely open. Even if Jones has only one course of action open to him, he is free to the extent he desires that course of action and is not externally coerced to do it. Hence, even if Jones is inherently depraved in nature and can do only evil, he is free if he desires to do evil.

The soft-determinists also correctly point out that the idea of freedom as indeterminate uncaused cause is incompatible with moral responsibility.[18] Indeterminism is the idea that human actions are not governed by laws of cause and effect but by chance and randomness. If my actions were not subject to causal laws, my arm could simply fly out and punch Jones in the nose, irrespective of my desires. We can hardly associate such random and uncontrollable acts with acts for which an agent is responsible. Hence, the soft-determinist claims that freedom requires causal determinism and that my actions flow from my character, but persons are never free to do other than they in fact do.

It is doubtful, however, that this weaker concept of human freedom adequately explains morally significant actions. It makes little sense to morally blame Jones for robbing that 7-11 if Jones could not refrain from doing so. We assess moral blame to a person only if he/she fails to do what we think he ought to have done. Hence, if we morally blame Jones for robbing that 7-11, we imply that Jones could have refrained from doing so even though he did not. *I may be free to do as I desire, but if I am not free but to desire as I do, I am not blameworthy for the results of those desires.* Moreover, a definition of freedom as the absence of external coercion assigns moral freedom to acts which are not, in fact, the result of a free choice. For example, the fact that a two-year-old is free to void his bladder without external constraint and whenever he desires does not amount to freedom. A person may be said to exercise free-agency in a morally significant sense only if he/she is ultimately responsible for his/her chosen act and if he/she could have chosen otherwise.

I believe that the traditional ideas of freedom must be refined if morally significant freedom is to be asserted. First, the concept of causal necessity, as determinists have often conceived it, is misleading in the context of human freedom. The fact that events are limited by causal patterns does not mean that human volition is necessitated in the sense that alternative choice is not

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is usually associated with David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) sec. 8. It is clear, however, that Augustine had enunciated this notion of freedom long before Hume. See also R. E. Hobart, "The Harmony of Free Will and Determinism" in David Berlinski, ed., *Philosophy: The Cutting Edge* (New York: Alfred Publishing Co., 1976), pp. 568–88. Sterling McMurrin also accepts the notion of freedom as absence of coercion, *Religion, Reason, and Truth* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1983), p. 216.

[18] For a treatment of this point in the context of Mormon thought, see Kent Robson, "The Foundation of Freedom in Mormon Thought," *Sunstone* 7 (Sept.–Oct. 1982): 51–54. My thanks to Dr. Robson for his helpful suggestions and kind discussions.

possible. As the positivist philosopher A. J. Ayer noted, it has not yet been shown that human behavior is subject to natural law in the sense required of determinism.[19] Science long ago abandoned the vulgar view that compares causation to coercion—including the view that causes necessitate their effects—in favor of a more subtle view of causation dealing primarily with relations of events, especially in "sciences" like psychology which deal with human volition.

Second, the determinist has erected a false dichotomy, claiming that the only alternative to causal determinism is random indeterminism. There is a third notion of human agency that is neither the inevitable effect of a person's determined character nor merely a random occurrence. It is a notion of agency as "creative synthesis." Consciousness is a synthesis of unorganized stimuli into an integrated experience, and freedom inevitably arises from this creative act. Human freedom consists of a synthetic unity of experience not present in the stimuli from which consciousness arises. Freedom is created by "the actual self alive in the moment of free decision."[20] While a free act arises from the agent's character, it does not arise in a determined and wholly predictable way, for the character is itself partially formed and partially reformed in the moment of free decision. Charles Hartshorne, the process philosopher whose insights inspired this notion of freedom, states that "each of us adds to the world something that no wisdom could have wholly foreseen. This creating, this deciding of the otherwise undecided, this forming of the previously inchoate, is our dignity . . . each of us is an artist whose product is life or experience itself."[21]

I believe that this idea of agency as creative synthesis is consistent with the Mormon idea that persons freely shape their character over time. For unless choices both arise from and influence the agent's character, no such character development is possible. However, this straightforward sense of categorical freedom requires the possibility of choice among genuine alternatives and is, therefore, incompatible with infallible foreknowledge. In this view, Jones's choices are not determined until Jones chooses. If God knew in 600 B.C. that Jones would rob that 7-11 in 1995, however, then it is impossible for Jones to choose otherwise. Suppose Jones did in fact refrain from robbing the 7-11 in the moment of free decision? Then in 1995 Jones caused God to hold a false belief. Because it is pure nonsense to suggest that God knew something but was wrong about it, the possibility that Jones could refrain from robbing that 7-11 in 1995 is logically excluded. Because Mormonism is committed to the stronger idea of freedom entailed in alternative choice, it must reconsider the nature of God's omniscience.

One redefinition of omniscience has been suggested to solve the problem confronting omniscience and free-will in the absolutist tradition. Aquinas suggested that God knows timelessly and therefore does not have *fore*knowledge

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[19] A. J. Ayer, *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Random House, 1982), p. 16.

[20] Charles Hartshorne, *The Logic of Perfection* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court Books, 1962), p. 20; see also C. A. Campbell. *On Selfhood and Godhood* (London, England: Allen & Unwin, 1957), ch. 9.

[21] Hartshorne, *Logic of Perfection*, p. 20.

(or *before* knowledge), but absolute knowledge of past, present, and future simultaneously.[22] This suggestion proves even more problematic than the problem of foreknowledge.

Timelessness

The concept of timelessness derives from Platonism and was introduced into Judaism by Philo Judaeus and into Christianity by Boethius, a pagan philosopher, and by Augustine.[23] A timeless being, however, could not coherently do any of the things the biblical deity is said to have done, such as create a world, enter into a relationship with a human being, or respond to prayer.

If God were timeless, he could not be omnipotent. Indeed, a timeless being is necessarily impotent. For if something is produced or created, then it begins in time and therefore has position in time. If God cannot produce objects or states of affairs having position in time, he must be incapable of doing anything whatsoever, for production of a temporal state of affairs requires a relation to what is produced. Hence, if God is timeless, he could not have created anything at all.[24]

The proposition that God is timeless also logically entails that he is immutable and impassible, or unchanging and without passions. If God changes in any manner then he must be characterized at some time [t_n] differently from God as characterized prior to that time [at t_{n-1}]. Neither can God be influenced by prayer or any human action, for if God were influenced by prayer offered at a given time [t_n], he would have to be emotionally different at some time after the prayer [at t_{n+1}].

In relation to the idea of free-will, if God knows that Jones will rob that 7-11 in 1995, the idea of timelessness suggests not merely that Jones cannot refrain from robbing that 7-11 in 1995, but that he has already robbed it from all eternity. Indeed, in the same moment of reality, Jones is robbing the 7-11, repenting, and sitting exalted beside God. In fact, a timeless being could not know anything at all.[25] David Hume observed,

> Ought we never to abscribe to [God] any attributes that are absolutely incompatible with that intelligent nature essential to him. A mind whose acts and senti-

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[22] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Qu. 1, Art. 13. "His knowledge is measured by eternity, as is also His Being; and eternity, being simultaneously whole, comprises all time."

[23] Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, Prose 3, ch. 6; Augustine, *De Genesis ad Litteram* 8.26.48.

[24] Stated formally:

1. If God is timeless, he transcends temporal succession.
2. If God performs any action (such as create a world or respond to prayer), then he must bring about a state of affairs at some time t_n, different from a state of affairs prior to His action at t_{n-1}.
3. Thus, any such action entails temporal succession (2).
4. Premise 3 precludes premise 1.
5. Therefore, God cannot be both timeless and creator of a world or responsive to prayer (4).

[25] Norman Kretzman suggests that omniscience and immutability are incompatible attributes. Because a timeless being is immutable, a timeless being is not omniscient, for it could

ments and ideas are not distinct and successive, one that is wholly simple and totally immutable, is a mind which has no thought, no reason, no will, no sentiment, no love, no hatred; or in a word, is no mind at all. It is an abuse of terms to give it that appelation.[26]

Mormons have generally been aware that their idea of God requires that he be involved in process even though he may stand in a different relation to time than do mortals. For instance, Orson Pratt told the Reverend F. Austin: "God and all his magnificant works are limited to duration and time. It could not be otherwise." [27] B. H. Roberts told the Reverend Vander Donckt that in taking Jesus Christ as the revelation of the nature of God, there is necessarily a "succession of time with God — a before and an after; here is being and becoming." [28] However, the notion that God is timeless has recently been introduced into Mormon thought. Neal A. Maxwell of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, writes, "The past, present, and future are before God *simultaneously*. . . . Therefore, God's omniscience is not solely a function of prolonged and discerning familiarity with us — but of the stunning reality that the past, present, and future are part of an 'eternal now' with God" [29] (italics in original). The idea of God's eternity here appears to consist not in the Hebrew notion of God's eternal duration *in time* without beginning or end; but of transcendence of temporal succcession. In fairness to Elder Maxwell, we must recognize that his observations are meant as rhetorical expressions to inspire worship rather than as an exacting philosophical analysis of the idea of timelessness. Furthermore, in a private conversation in January 1984, Elder Maxwell told me that he is unfamiliar with the classical idea of timelessness and the problems it entails. His intent was not to convey the idea that God transcends temporal succession, but "to help us trust in God's perspectives, and not to be too constrained by our own provincial perceptions while we are in this mortal cocoon." [30]

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not know which states of affairs are now actual. "Omniscience and Immutability," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 43:14 (1966). Consider the problem formally:

1. A perfect being is not subject to change (i.e., is immutable).
2. A perfect being knows everything (i.e., is omniscient).
3. A being that knows everything knows what time it is (i.e., which states of affairs are now actual).
4. A being that always knows what time it is must be subject to change (i.e., to say of any being that it knows something different from what it used to know is to say it has changed in relation to the objects of its knowledge).
5. Hence, a perfect being is subject to change (2, 3, 4).
6. Hence, a perfect being is not a perfect being (1, 5).
7. Hence, there is not a being that is both immutable and omniscient (6).

[26] David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (New York: Hafer Publishing, 1948), p. 32.

[27] Orson Pratt, *The Kingdom of God*, Liverpool, 21 Oct. 1848, No. 2, p. 4. See Kent Robson, "Time and Omniscience in Mormon Thought" *Sunstone* 5 (May–June 1980): 17–23 for a general treatment of temporal referents in Mormon scriptures.

[28] B. H. Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret News, 1908), pp. 95–96.

[29] Neal A. Maxwell. *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1979), pp. 95–96.

[30] I refer to this private conversation and to excerpts from Elder Maxwell's letter with his permission. He writes, "I would never desire to do, say, or write anything which would

The deity of Mormonism, in particular could not be timeless because he is corporeal and therefore has spatial position. If our idea of space entails a number of consecutive temporal positions, then even a perfected body must relate to time. Further, if matter is uncreated, then time is an eternal aspect of reality. Indeed, for Mormons spirit and matter are described as essentially the same, and therefore spirit also occupies space, has location and moves in spatio-temporal dimensions.[31] The Mormon God, like the biblical God, is described in terms distinctively human such as caring, judging, forgiving, responding, and freely choosing. Nelson Pike demonstrated, in what is probably the most thorough treatment of the idea of timelessness to date, that the idea is incoherent when applied to anything that possesses such human attributes, for all of these actions logically entail a succession of time.[32]

I believe that the idea of a God who is in no place and in no time is an idea of no God. If God is incorporeal in the sense that he lacks all spatial extension, then he also lacks temporal identity. He cannot consistently be conceived as a personal identity because he lacks all criteria of identity. There is no way to distinguish him from any other identity. If God does not have temporal identity or "bodily" extension, *person* has no cognitive content when applied to him.[33]

A Mormon Concept of Omniscience

Mormonism has often demonstrated an innate genius in dealing with the problems of God's omniscience. Indeed, Mormons have quite willingly modified their understanding of omniscience. The proposition elucidated by Orson Pratt that "God cannot learn new truths" was officially pronounced false doctrine by Brigham Young and his counselors in 1860 and again in 1865.[34] Brigham Young declared, "According to theory, God can progress no further in knowledge and power, but the God that I serve is progressing eternally, and so are His children." [35] Wilford Woodruff taught, "God Himself is increasing

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cause others unnecessary problems. . . . I would not have understood certain philosophical implications arising (for some) because I quoted from Purtill who, in turn, quoted from Boethius. Nor would I presume to know of God's past, including His former relationship to time and space." Elder Neal A. Maxwell to Blake T. Ostler, 24 Jan. 1984. My thanks to Elder Maxwell for his helpful and generous comments on this and numerous other subjects.

[31] "There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine and pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes; we cannot see it" (D&C 131:7–8). "The elements are eternal . . ." (D&C 93:33).

[32] Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), p. 121ff. Much of my analysis of the problem of timelessness is indebted to Pike.

[33] Terence Penelhum, *Survival and Disembodied Spirits* (London, 1970), pp. 54ff.; Paul Edwards, "Some Notes on Anthropomorphic Theology" in S. H. Hooke, ed., *Religious Experience and Truth* (New York: New York University Press, 1961), pp. 241–50; See also Richard Swineburne's rejoinder in *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 106–25.

[34] The 1860 statement is in James R. Clark, ed., *Messages of the First Presidency*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–75), 2:214–23; the 1865 statement is in *Millennial Star* 26 (21 Oct. 1865): 658–60.

[35] Parley P. Pratt. *Journal of Discourses of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 26 vols. (Liverpool, England, 1856), 11:26. Hereafter cited as JD by volume and page.

and progressing in knowledge, power, and dominion and will do so worlds without end." [36] Lorenzo Snow taught, "We will continue on improving, advancing and increasing in wisdom, intelligence, power and dominion, worlds without end." [37] Mormon leaders suggested that just as God could not know the greatest possible integer because such a term is meaningless, so an absolute knowledge of truth is impossible because the realm of truth is dynamic.[38]

More recently, such insights have passed into disfavor among some Mormons. As early as 1929, a committee of review for B. H. Roberts's still unpublished manuscript "The Truth, The Way, The Life," cautioned him to amend his view that God progresses in knowledge and mastery of eternal laws.[39] In our own day, the view that God grows in knowledge has been termed heresy.[40] The reasons for this about-face in doctrine are complex, but the reluctance of some to accept a deity who may discover new laws and eternal truths is understandable, for he could discover laws that contravene his plan of salvation. Faith demands a more secure object of worship.

There is, however, a notion of omniscience that allows for preplanning and free-agency and yet does not reduce God to the status of a mere scientist forever learning new truths. Charles Hartshorne suggests that to know all things does not necessarily entail infallible foreknowledge.

> To know all that exists is not to know all that might exist, except as potentialities. . . . It is not even true that the omniscient must know details of the future, unless it can be proved . . . that the future has any details to know. (Of course, it will be fully detailed, but this does not imply that it has any detailed will-be's as part of itself now). Thus, there is no reason why perfect knowledge could not change, grow in content, provided it changed only as its objects changed, and added as new items to its knowledge only things that were not in being, not there to know previously.[41]

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[36] *Conference Report*, April 1914, p. 5; JD 6:120.

[37] *Conference Report*, April 1901, p. 2.

[38] Wilford Woodruff, Journal, 4 March 1860. "Prest Young said I corrected O. Pratt to day I did not say to him that God would increase to all Eternity. But I said the moment that we say that God knows all things comprehends all things and has a fulness of all that He will ever obtain that moment eternity seases you put bounds to Eternity & space & matter and you make an end and stopping plase to it." Cf. JD 1:93; 6:120; 11:286. Of course, I have extrapolated a bit of implicit logic from this statement.

[39] The committee queried: "What is the need of stating that God is progressing in knowledge? In other words, that there are laws and eternal truths, which he did not know? This will only lead to controversy & needless discussion and argument, and no purpose accomplished. In the judgment of the committee the statement should not be made. There are scriptures which contradict this thought." George Albert Smith to Rudger Clawson, 10 Oct. 1929; photocopy in possession of the author; original in Historical Department Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, hereafter LDS Church Archives. The committee consisted of George Albert Smith, Joseph Fielding Smith, Melvin J. Ballard, Stephen L. Richards, and David O. McKay.

[40] Bruce R. McConkie, "The Seven Deadly Heresies," speech at Brigham Young University, 1 June 1980: "What Is Our Relationship to Members of the Godhead?" *Church News*, 20 March 1982, p. 5. Elder McConkie's speeches make it clear that he understands that the Mormon diety has little in common with the God of the creeds. See also, Kent Robson, "Omnis On the Horizon," *Sunstone* 8 (July–August 1983): 21–23.

[41] Charles Hartshorne, "Alternative Conceptions of God," in William P. Alston, ed., *Religious Beliefs and Philosophical Thought* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1964), p. 327.

B. H. Roberts also suggests that to have all knowledge does not necessarily imply "that God is omniscient up to the point that further progress in knowledge is impossible to him; but that all knowledge that is, all that exists, God knows." [42] Given human free-agency, it is impossible to know the future because the future is yet undecided; therefore, propositions about the future are neither true not false, but yet to be determined. Because omniscience must correspond to the objects of its knowledge, a notion of omniscience must be developed which allows for future, contingent possibilities.

In his *Dilemma of Determinism*, William James hints at such an idea of omniscience compatible with both categorical freedom and trust in God's predictions of the future as found in scripture.[43] I suggest these provisions of omniscience entailed in James's "master chess player" analogy:

1. God exists and is omniscient: for all X, if X is actual, God knows that X; if X is possible, God knows that potentially X.
2. God knows now all possibilities (all things).
3. God knows now what his purposes are and that he will achieve them.
4. God does *not* know now, in every case, precisely which possibilities will be chosen or become actual.
5. God knows now how he will respond to whichever contingent possibility occurs to insure the realization of his purposes.

This notion of existentially contingent omniscience suggests that God knows all things (including laws) now and possibly existing (1, 2). It also allows for free choices among alternatives (2, 4). This idea suggests that God knows all possible avenues of choices (2, 5), and coupled with an idea of adequate power entails that God's plans and declarations of future events will be realized (3, 5). Therefore, this concept of omniscience potentially describes an essential attribute of the adequate object of faith. In fact, this concept of omniscience expands the knowledge of God manyfold over that traditionally ascribed to him because it encompasses not merely the single, inevitable reality but the almost innumerable permutations of reality possible within the metaphysical foundations of the universe.

The idea of existentially contingent omniscience is consistent with the Mormon idea that all reality (God, mortals, and the universe) is in process or growing more complex through eternal progression. Such an idea of reality in process is analogous to Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy, assuming that the future is becoming "a creative advance into novelty" and that all

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[42] B. H. Roberts, *Seventy's Course in Theology 1911* (reprint ed., Dallas: L. K. Taylor Pub., 1976), p. 70. Though scriptures are not intended as definitional statements, the notions of omniscience and omnipotence that I propose here are recognized with remarkable clarity in 1 Nephi 9:6: "But the Lord knoweth all things from the beginning; wherefore, he prepareth a way to accomplish all his works among the children of men; for behold, he hath all power unto the fulfilling of his words." Explicit in this scripture are the temporal nature of God's knowledgee and his preparation for the possible eventualities which will be brought about by the free choices of persons, as well as his active intervention and planning to bring about his predictions.

[43] William James, "The Dilemma of Determinism," *Unitarian Review*, Sept. 1884.

reality is never completed.[44] Creation is viewed in both Mormonism and process philosophy as an ongoing act of bringing order out of chaos and enhancing personal potential through increasing integration. In contrast, the idea that God infallibly foreknows the future requires a metaphysic grounded in the notion that reality is complete in God's knowledge and that freedom is mere appearance. Rejection of absolute omniscience is consistent with Mormonism's commitment to the inherent freedom of uncreated selves, the temporal progression of deity, the moral responsibility of humans, and consequential denial of salvation by arbitrary grace alone.

Perhaps the most significant consequence of such a view is that God becomes a partner with mortals to freely shape a future that has real possibilities, even for God. Human actions have moral significance in their future implications, and one may have faith that God makes a difference in human destiny. The classical idea of absolute omniscience reduces faith and hope in God to absurdity. For if God infallibly foreknows the future then prayer could not possibly influence him. Given the finality of reality in God's foreknowledge, even God is impotent to alter its course.[45] In contrast, the Judeo-Christian idea of prayer tacitly affirms that God can somehow make things better than they would have been had the prayer not been offered. Such prayer expresses hope for a better world and manifests faith that God can make a difference. I believe that such prayer is the very core of religious belief. Traditional theology often contends that God transcends such intimate interaction.[46] A relationship which precludes free response, however, is more *sub*personal than *trans*personal. It seems inconsistent and futile to me to praise and thank God for bringing about the inevitable and absolutely absurd to petition God to change the unavoidable. I am personally incapable of praying to a being who is the slave of an inevitable reality, for a notion of prayer that asks God to change things is irreconcilable with a concept of God which maintains that he cannot be influenced, respond, or alter reality from its inevitable course. If one prays as Christ prayed — petitioning the Father to bring about states of affairs — the logical implications of one's actions demand a concept of God radically different from that of traditional theology.

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[44] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, David Ray Griffin & Donald Sherburne, eds., rev. ed. (London: Collier MacMillan, 1978), pp. 88–110; Floyd Ross, "Process Philosophy and Mormon Thought," *Sunstone* 7 (Jan.–Feb. 1982): 22.

[45] Stated in logical form:

1. God is omniscient: God has fully detailed and infallible foreknowledge of all future events.
2. If God foreknows that course-of-events$_a$ will occur, then course-of-events$_a$ will occur matter what.
3. If prayer is efficacious, then human petitions may influence God to bring about a course-of-events$_b$ that would not otherwise occur had the prayer not been offered.
4. God knows that course-of-events$_a$ will occur.
5. Hence, God cannot bring about a course-of-events$_b$ in response to prayer without contravening his foreknowledge (1, 2, 4).
6. Hence, prayer is not efficacious (3, 5).

[46] See my "Absurdities of Prayer to the Metaphysical Absolute," *Inscape* [Brigham Young University], Fall–Winter 1983, pp. 24–38.

Yet if God is free to change reality, why is there so much pain, suffering, and sin in the world? Perhaps traditional theology avoids a concept of a God that can make a difference in human experience because it brings the problem of evil so clearly into focus.

OMNIPOTENCE AND EVIL

The Classical Dilemma

The claim that God has unlimited power raises perhaps the most persistent problem an absolutist theology must contend with — the problem of evil. Stated simply, if God is all-powerful and all-good, then evil cannot exist. For if evil exists, then either God chooses not to prevent evil and is therefore not all-good or he cannot prevent evil and is therefore not all-powerful.

The concept of omnipotence has not traditionally been understood to mean that God can do whatever he pleases, but that he can bring about logically coherent states of affairs. God's power is not limited because he cannot do the logically impossible, for the logically impossible is merely a collection of meaningless words even though such words may make syntactical sense. For example, the proposition that God could create a four-sided triangle is mere babble.

Nevertheless, a perfectly good being must oppose evil if these words are to have any meaning. Hence, a perfectly good being prevents genuine evils, those evils without which the universe would finally, all things considered, be better. Irrespective of the particular ethical philosophy espoused, if genuine evils exist, then in principle the God of the orthodox tradition does not exist.[47] Whether such evils exist, however, is essentially a value judgment.

The fact remains that if God is unlimited in love and limited only by logic in creating his world, he could have logically created a world where babies are not born without faces and limbs; he could have prevented the extermination of six million Jews, the murder of five young boys, and the kidnapping of a four-year-old girl. If God could not make a difference in these instances, then he could not possibly be the object of our devotions and hopes, nor could we make a mockery of human dignity by worshipping a being who calls such things good.

The problem of evil is made greater in an absolutist theology where God created the cosmos *ex nihilo*. If God created the cosmos *ex nihilo*, then he is

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[47] David Ray Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), pp. 22–29. Stated formally:

1. God is omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good (by definition).
2. An omnipotent being can bring about any logically possible state of affairs (by definition).
3. A world without genuine evil is a logically possible state of affairs.
4. God could unilaterally bring about an actual world without genuine evil (1, 2, 3).
5. A perfectly good being prevents all the genuine evil it can (by definition).
6. If there is any genuine evil in the world, then there is no God (1, 4, 5).
7. There is genuine evil in the world (i.e., things occur that the world would finally, all things considered, be better without).
8. Therefore, there is no God (6, 7).

completely responsible for all existing states of affairs both because he brought them about and because he could have had them otherwise. Thus, God is responsible for both moral evil (the evil brought about by mortals such as human suffering and sin) and natural evils (those evils which are not caused by persons, but by the physical universe which encompasses them — for instance, earthquakes, birth defects, and diseases).

Traditional theology has attempted some ingenious but inadequate explanations of the problem of evil. One explanation suggests that evil simply does not exist. Many Eastern religions and Christian Scientists believe that the existence of evil is mere illusion.[48] Yet it makes little sense to speak of the experience of pain as illusion; pain exists only as an experience, and the experience of pain is validated by the mere fact of being experienced. Augustine suggested that evil is privation of good, just as darkness is the absence of light. In this explanation, all that God creates is of necessity good, and evil is merely nonbeing, or the lack of God's creative activity.[49] However, an omnipotent being could overcome all darkness with light, and all nonexistence with existence. Christ could not have died for, nor Adam because of, sins which do not exist. Because Christian doctrine requires the recognition of evil, the denial of evil is also the denial of Christianity.

The Free-Will Defense

Augustine's free-will defense, recently refined by John Hick, F. R. Tennant, and Alvin Plantinga, claims that an all-good being prevents evils only if it can do so without thereby preventing some greater good not possible without the lesser evil.[50] In essence, this defense is the denial of genuine evil, for all evil is a necessary condition for a greater good, just as a penicillin injection is a pain that we choose to encounter because of its benefits. Hence, there are no evils without which, all things considered, the universe would finally be better.[51] The free-will defense asserts that freedom is a necessary condition for the development of moral virtue and evil a necessary consequence of human freedom.

In opposition to the free-will defense, J. L. Mackie contends that evil is not a necessary result of human freedom. Christians believe that Jesus, though tempted and free to sin, was spotless. If there is no logical impossibility in a person's freely choosing the good on one, or on more than one, occasion there is no logical impossibility in a person's freely choosing the good on every occasion. God could have created in the beginning only those individuals whom he

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[48] See also, D. T. Suzuki, "The Basis of Buddhist Philosophy" in Richard Woods, ed., *Understanding Mysticism* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1980), pp. 126–45; Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health with a Key to the Scriptures* (Boston, Mass.: Christian Science Publishing Society, 1917), pp. 165–66, 177, 261.

[49] Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, Bk. 12, ch. 7; *Enchiridion* 4, 13–14.

[50] John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978); Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdman's 1974); Frederick R. Tennant, *Philosophical Theology* (London: Cambridge, 1930), vol. 2. The free-will defense claims that there are no "dysteleological" sufferings, or no evils without redeeming purpose.

[51] Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil*, pp. 199–201.

knew would freely choose the good. Thus, Mackie constructs the problem of evil:[52]

1. God is omnipotent, omniscient, all-good, and exists.
2. An omnipotent being can bring about any logically possible state of affairs.
3. An all-good being prevents all the evil it can.
4. That all free men do what is right on every occasion is a logically possible state of affairs.
5. God can create men such that they always do what is right (2, 4).
6. If God can create men such that they always do what is right and God is all-good, then any free man created by God always does what is right (1, 3, 5).
7. Hence, no free man created by God ever performs morally evil actions (6).

In response, Alvin Plantinga suggests that God cannot consistently create every logically possible state of affairs because some states of affairs are mutually exclusive. Thus, premise 2 is incoherent. For instance, it is logically possible that humans are not created by God. Hence, this concept of omnipotence suggests that God could create persons such that they are not created by God. Because premise 2 is incoherent, the notion that God can do anything logically possible must be refined. Plantinga claims that the fact that a person who always chooses good is logically possible does not entail that God could create such a person. Not even God could consistently create a person and bring it about that this person always chooses what is right. God may create persons who always do good, but not even God could consistently *cause* a person to choose *freely*.[53]

The free-will defense requires the stronger notion of freedom of alternative choice, for the weaker notion of freedom as the absence of external coercion is consistent with the fact that a person's acts are both foreknown and caused and hence this argument succumbs to Mackie's argument.[54] As a consequence, the free-will defense also requires a modified account of God's omniscience. Even if one concedes the stronger notion of freedom, however, one may still contend that an omnipotent being could have created morally virtuous persons in the beginning and foregone the necessity of evil. At the very least, he could have created persons with a strong bias toward good. The fact that a person's character is virtuous does not deprive him/her of the freedom to choose otherwise.

To this argument, Plantinga and F. R. Tennant respond that such a virtue is not genuine. Tennant claims that our concept of good has meaning only

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[52] J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64 (April 1955): 254.

[53] Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil*, pp. 45–53.

[54] Richard Swineburne suggests that immutable prescience is not an essential attribute to the Christian Deity, and he is therefore willing to modify the foreknowledge of God to make room for free-will. *The Coherence of Theism*, pp. 144–45.

when related to such concepts as temptation, courage, and compassion.[55] The value judgment implicit in this response is cogently stated by John Hick: "One who has attained to goodness by meeting and eventually mastering temptations, and thus by rightly making responsible decisions in concrete situations possesses a virtue more valuable than would be one created *ab initio* [from the beginning] in a state of moral innocence or virtue." [56] Hick would add that God seeks a genuine relationship with his creations, and a genuine relationship cannot be coerced or created *ex nihilo*; rather, it must be entered into freely.

The problem of evil in its present state is an interesting challenge for Mormon theology. David Paulsen suggests that if tried moral virtue is somehow of greater value than untried virtue, then mortals who progress in moral virtue by entering into a state of probation must possess a potential virtue of greater value than that possessed by the absolute God who possesses virtue necessarily, and therefore without overcoming moral obstacles. Indeed, if Tennant is correct that moral goodness is meaningful only in a context of genuine temptations and trials, then calling the absolute God 'good' is contradictory. One could avoid the dilemma by asserting that God forged his divine character in eons past by means of a self-directed developmental process. Of course, Mormon thought posits such a developmental process for both the Father and the Son. This idea, however, is not compatible with Tennant's and Hick's concept of God.[57]

Moreover, the creation of a morally virtuous personality *ex nihilo* is not logically impossible. The assumption that evil is necessary to the development of a morally significant character limits God's creativity, not by logic but by the inherent nature of personality. Plantinga tacitly recognizes this limitation by positing a "creaturely essence" of possible persons. Plantinga claims that God could not have created just any morally virtuous persons he pleased to because his creating is limited by the essential nature of persons which necessarily preexists independently of whatever God may desire. Plantinga claims, moreover, that God could create only persons who suffer from "transworld depravity," and as a result, in every world where persons are significantly free, they commit some evil actions.[58]

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[55] Tennant, *Philosophical Theology*, pp. 188–89. Cf. Ninian Smart, "Omnipotence, Evil and Supermen," *Philosophy* (April/July 1961): 188–92.

[56] Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, p. 255.

[57] David L. Paulsen, "Divine Determinateness and the Free-will Defense," *Analysis* 41 (June 1981): 150–53.

[58] Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil*, pp. 49–53. Plantinga derives his theory of "creaturely essences" from Platonic identity theory. Thus, even God could not have created Zeno or any other specific individual without instantiating (i.e., bringing about in creation of possible worlds) those distinguishing properties essential to him, defining him uniquely as Zeno in every possible world. Plantinga tacitly follows Augustine here in assuming that depravity is entailed in the proposition that persons are created *ex nihilo* because not uncreated like God. See *De Civitate Dei*, Bk. 12, ch. 6: "Therefore, an inferior being does not make the will evil but the will itself, because it is a created will, wickedly and inordinately seeks the inferior being. . . . The person who talks of a man making his own will evil, whether because he is a nature or because he is a nature made out of nothing? He will learn that the evil arises not from the fact that the man is a nature, but from the fact that that nature was

Plantinga's response to the problem of evil, however, is not consistent with the notion of God he seeks to defend. The possibility that every "creaturely essence" suffers from "transworld depravity" would be realized only if God were faced with a limited number of creaturely essences or possible persons from which to choose. What presented God with this limited choice before the creation *ex nihilo*? As Mackie insists, there could be "no conditions on God's creating *prior to the creation and existence of any created beings with free will* . . . this suggestion is simply incoherent." [59] Of course, the dilemma could be escaped were Plantinga willing to reject the notion of *creatio ex nihilo* and accept the idea that God's creative power faces metaphysical limitations in the nature of self-directing selves. The option has been seriously considered by process philosophers, but Plantinga seems unwilling to so modify his concept of God. Hence, to save God's goodness from the quandary of moral evil, only a finite God analogous to the morally dynamic God of Mormonism and a notion of free entities analogous to the Mormon idea of necessarily preexisting intelligences are logically possible.

Other problems with evil in an absolutist theodicy deserve closer attention. First, if God is the source of moral evil, then he could arbitrarily make moral innocence created *ab initio* more valuable than tried moral courage because, in the absolutist view, moral good becomes whatever God commands. Indeed, if God is the source of moral law then he may also command that our entire moral duty consists of murdering six million Jews. If one objects, claiming that God could never command morally reprehensible acts because he is good, it must be recognized that God is subject to moral laws independent of whatever his will may be. The very assertion that he could not command such a thing depends upon the assumption of moral concepts existing independently of God's will and to which he is subjected. Hence, a solution to the problem of evil which assumes that God allows evil to seek moral ends is premised on the existence of moral laws independent of his will.

Second, the free-will defense cannot explain natural evils because it explains only evils that arise from the misuse of human freedom. Earthquakes, leukemia, and epidemic hunger are evils that simply cannot be explained in terms of human freedom. One may contend that natural evils are instrumental in the development of moral courage and Christian compassion . In some instances this may be true; however, just as often the human spirit is crushed and the character paralyzed under the excessive weight of natural evils. Hick attempts to explain natural evils in terms of eschatological bliss, the belief that all pains will be recompensed in an after-life.[60] Such a view may hold that God is finally generous but does not exonerate his failure to prevent devastating diseases and horrendous hunger throughout time. In addition, the free-will defense cannot explain the amazing disproportion between the trials and

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made out of nothing [ex nihilo]." Such reasoning is a *non sequitur*, however, for the proposition "X is created out of nothing" in no way entails that "X is morally depraved."

[59] John L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1982), pp. 173–74.

[60] Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, p. 337ff.

temptations which leave some lives in relative peace and prosperity and others in pain and poverty, regardless of personal righteousness.

The Concept of Omnipotence

Ultimately, the classical concept of omnipotence is simply incoherent. A paradox arises if God can bring about any logically possible state of affairs: he could create a world he could not subsequently control. Obviously, if God cannot control what happens, he is not omnipotent. The objection that this paradox is a meaningless contradiction fails because it makes perfectly good sense to say that a mortal could create a machine he/she could not subsequently control. In fact, the paradox is analogous to the situation the free-will defense implies: God has created a world he cannot fully control because creation of morally free agents precludes complete control.[61] Plantinga's concept of omnipotence is of little help because it amounts to a tautology — it is true of all beings. His definition says "X is omnipotent if X is capable of performing any action A such that the proposition 'X performs A' is logically possible." Of course, the poor fellow who is capable only of blowing his nose is capable of performing any action A such that the proposition "the man who is capable of only blowing his nose performs A" is logically possible.[62] Further, the simple definition analogous to the classical definition of omniscience is also incoherent: "For all X, if X, God can bring about that X." This definition gives God power to do only what has already been done.

Finally, the orthodox notion of God is incompatible with the idea of omnipotence entailed in the free-will defense. The power to create a being that cannot subsequently be controlled and thereby to modify one's power is not an attribute that could consistently be possessed by an immutable being who remains unchanged in all respects and whose power is not conditioned by any other being.[63]

Satisfied that the orthodox (traditional Catholic/Protestant) theology is incoherent and incapable of solving the problem of evil, process philosophers reject the notion of *creatio ex nihilo* and posit a dynamic God who elicits order out of chaos and value out of disharmony. According to Alfred North Whitehead, the fountain of process philosophy, the world is charged with creative freedom of metaphysical necessity.[64] Because the world contains uncreated,

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[61] Mackie, *Miracle of Theism*, pp. 160–62. An omnipotent being can indeed create a world that it cannot subsequently control, but it can do so only at the cost of forfeiting its omnipotence. The free-will defense is a plausible defense only if God creates beings that he *cannot* control, not merely that he chooses not to control. For if God chooses to allow evil, he is culpable to the extent he could have prevented it.

[62] Anthony Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 75. Much of my analysis of the problems of free-will and omnipotence is indebted to Kenny.

[63] Ibid., p. 99.

[64] Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, pp. 130–35 and *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1933), p. 230. Other philosophers who maintain that God must be finite in some respects include William James, William Pepperell Montague, John Stuart Mill, Edgar Sheffield Brightman, Peter A. Bertocci, and Charles Hartshorne. Process philosophy has had a significant influence on a number of Christian theologians. See Delwin Brown, Ralph

self-determining "actual entities" who exert power independently of all other beings including God, perfect power is the optimal concentration of power which is compatible with the existence of other powerful agents.[65] Hence, God's power is persuasive rather than controlling as a result of the ultimate metaphysical structure of reality. If there are many centers of free power, then no world in which these independent entities are involved can be completely determined by any one of them. As David Ray Griffin noted in his brilliant exposition of a process theodicy: "Such a view greatly alters the problem of evil. Even a being with perfect power cannot unilaterally bring about that which it is impossible for one being unilaterally to effect. And it is impossible for one being unilaterally to effect the best possible state of affairs among other beings. In other words, one being cannot guarantee that the other beings will avoid genuine evils. The *possibility* of genuine evil is necessary." [66]

A Mormon Theodicy

Mormonism shares the basic insights of process philosophy primarily because of its pluralistic proclivity, materialistic emphasis, preference for process, and rejection of *creatio ex nihilo*. Mormonism also exalts the Christian vision that emphasizes the social nature of God as a being preeminent among beings. By definition, any power that God exerts is power in relation to something distinct from himself. Power is necessarily a relational concept, for to exert power is to exert power in relation to the object influenced. Hence, any coherent idea of power must consider the nature of the reality over which it is exerted.[67]

James, and Gene Reeves, eds., *Process Philosophy and Christian Thought* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1971).

[65] John B. Cobb and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), pp. 14–29. The ultimate reality according to process theology is creativity continually producing new occasions of experience out of the manifold of the previous moment. To be actual is to be creative. Every "*actual entity*" is a momentary event charged with creativity. It exerts power in two important ways. First, it receives and synthesizes the data of the preceding moment, selecting what will be included or excluded from experience and used to create a new and unique actual entity which incorporates the experience of its past. In each new moment of the universe's life, a new wave of actual entities involves an element of creativity or self-causation, for each is partly determined by the past and part determiner of the future. Second, as a self-directing entity, it again exerts power. It synthesizes a new indeterminate reality in the act of passing from what it formerly was to what it now is. All actual entities, like God himself, are both acted upon and act upon all other realities in the universe. While God's experience of and influence on all other realities is optimal or perfect, the actual entities experience and influence others only imperfectly. To be actual is to exercise these two types of power. This notion of actual entity may coincide with the Mormon concept of intelligences. While intelligences are considered capable of the integration of experience necessary for consciousness and free choice, actual entities are not necessarily conscious though they are free. An intelligence is essential identity — hence analogous to the idea of a "defining essence" in Whitehead's thought. An actual entity becomes a "defining essence" when it endures as an identity over time. In the sense that it conserves its past in the way it actualizes the present, every actual entity conserves its identity over time. Like an intelligence, an actual entity exists of metaphysical necessity. See my "The Idea of Pre-existence in the Development of Mormon Thought" DIALOGUE: A JOURNAL OF MORMON THOUGHT 14 (Spring 1982): 59–78.

[66] Griffin, *God, Power and Evil*, pp. 268–69; italics in original.

[67] Ibid., p. 265.

Perhaps the search for the maximum possible power, however, is as misdirected as the search for the greatest possible integer, for the concept of an almighty and all-good being requires only a minimally sufficient power to bring about the realization of his purposes. Such a power must be consistent with what is physically possible given the existence of other self-directing beings, moral principles, and laws defining mass/energy. A comprehensive and complete theodicy, or an explanation of the existence of genuine evils, can be expressed formally within a Mormon theological framework which recognizes this notion of power.

1. God is almighty, omniscient, all-good, and exists.
2. God is conditioned by the existence of coeternal realities such as:
   a. Intelligences (necessarily existing selves).
   b. Chaotic mass/energy.
   c. Moral principles.
   d. Physical laws defining time, space and matter.
3. God is almighty if he can bring about the optimal realization of potential among states of affairs (i.e., states of affairs consistent with there being other ontological realities).
4. A perfectly good being prevents all the evil and promotes all the good it can without thereby preventing a greater good.
5. Moral evils occur and God justifiably allows them because:
   a. Human nature is uncreated (2a).
   b. Humans are inherently self-determining and categorically free (2a).
   c. Humans are morally imperfect and potentially perfectible (2a, 2c).
   d. God's purpose in creation is to provide the opportunity for intellectual and moral development of persons (2a, 4).
   e. Moral opposition is necessary to moral development (2a, 2c).
   f. God did not create human nature either virtuous or depraved (5a, 5b).
   g. Humans sometimes choose evil (5b, 5c).
   h. God is justified in not contravening human evil choices (3, 4, 5d, 5e).
6. Natural evils occur and God is not blameworthy for them because;
   a. Chaotic mass/energy is uncreated (2b).
   b. The laws governing mass/energy are eternal and independent of God (2b, 2d).
   c. Some of these laws require that mass/energy be organized on causal principles (2d).
   d. Adverse physical circumstances may enhance moral and intellectual development of intelligences (2a, 2c, 5c).
   e. The nature of causal principles is such that many indiscriminant natural evils occur (6a, 6b, 6c).

f. God may justifiably allow some natural evils (3, 4, 6d).

7. Whatever evils occur are:
   a. Unpreventable by God consistent with individual autonomy.
   b. Unpreventable by God without thereby preventing a greater good.
   c. Unpreventable by God consistent with eternal laws.

Here Mormonism manifests its greatest strength in its ability to explain man's relationship to God and give meaning to life's challenges. In Mormonism, the concept of inherently free wills possessed by uncreated selves and the nonabsolutist notion of omnipotence absolve God from any complicity in the world's moral evils, while the uncreated, impersonal, and morally neutral environment of God mitigates his responsibility for physical evils.[68] Indeed, Mormonism views evil as a positive factor in human existence. The ultimate meaning of mortal existence is found in the struggle to overcome evil and refine the existential qualities of uncreated personhood. The moral gains made in mortality are genuine, and human actions make a real difference in human destiny. In Mormon thought, God is also confronted by the reality of evil and struggles endlessly against it in a continuing course of organizing the chaotic and enhancing the trivial. God shares humanity's moral struggle, feels genuine sorrow for human failures, rejoices in human moral triumphs and suffers when humans suffer. There is an earnestness in human experience because the possibility of genuine triumph entails the possibility of genuine defeat. God really loses when humans choose evil over good. Yet the chance at victory makes mortality an option that justifies its harsh conditions; we freely chose to encounter it. Mormons believe that they are truly laborers together with God, for God has not created evil nor the physical conditions from which it inevitably arises, nor would he allow evil could he end it without thereby making the victory impossible.

Some may object that this justification of the existence of evil limits God too much. They contend that putting the risk of human salvation in the hands of such a God makes the victory not only precarious but impossible. As H. J. McCloskey states, "The suggestion that God is all-good but imperfect, that he does not deliberately bring about these evils, that he is doing his best and cannot prevent them, is scarcely more comforting than the view that he deliberately arranges things so that these evils are part of the divine plan." [69]

However, the purpose of a theodicy is not to explain away evil, but to invest the human experience of evil with purpose and meaning. And the religion that can infuse value into human experience sufficient to make all that matters presently also all that matters ultimately meets its burden of religious

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[68] I am indebted here for much of my analysis to David Paulsen, "Comparative Coherency of Mormon (Finitistic) and Classical Theism," (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1975); Sterling McMurrin, *Theological Foundations*, pp. 97ff; Kim McCall, "Mormonism and the Problem of Evil," *Century II* [Brigham Young University] (Sept. 1976): 32–50; and Truman G. Madsen, *Eternal Man* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965). I am also indebted for their many kind discussions on this and other subjects.

[69] H. J. McCloskey, "On Being An Atheist," in *Philosophy and Contemporary Issues*, John Burr & Milton Goldinger, eds. (Toronto: MacMillan Co., 1972), p. 133.

significance. God's sheer omnipotence is adequate to give such meaning to human life, for the maximally valuable state entails not force per se, but meekness, longsuffering, and loving persuasion of other intrinsically valuable centers of freedom, where each agent finds happiness by increasing the happiness of others, increases its power by cooperation with others, increases its knowledge by sympathetic appreciation of the experience of others, and enhances its wisdom by working with others to achieve what cannot be achieved alone. In short, God's commitment to the highest good requires that he be socially conditioned. He is not satisfied with subjects; his very nature demands peers.

The Adequate Object of Worship

Concepts of Perfection

The most common challenge to the notion that God is socially related and in process is that such a being is not perfect. Because what we mean by "God" is a being that is perfect, it is impossible to solve the problem of evil by denying that God is perfect, for this in effect denies that there is a God. This challenge presupposes the very idea of classical perfection at issue. The value judgment underlying this idea of perfection was fostered by neo-Platonism which preferred Being to becoming, the One to the many, the timeless to the temporal, and the abstract Ideal to the concrete and material. The orthodox notion of static perfection is that God exists *a se*, or completely independently of any relation to all other beings.

The concept of aseity consists of two distinct notions. First, if God is absolute then those attributes which are essential to his godly status cannot depend on anything independent of himself. Otherwise, he would be limited by dependence on other beings; and if they ceased to exist, he would cease to exist as God. Thus, if God depended on any contingently existing thing, his godly status would be precarious. Moreover, because God must be the explanation of all other existence, he must be absolutely unrelated. For if it were necessary to refer to any other thing to explain God, he would not be the unexplained explanation of the cosmos. Second, the absolute must emulate all great-making attributes to their greatest potential, for anything potentially greater is not absolute. Hence, God must be completely actualized and therefore cannot progress in any manner, for unrealized potential is considered a defect. This line of reasoning is the basis for Aristotle's Unmoved Mover, or Thomas Aquinas's 'Actus Purus,' a being who is pure act though without any act conceivably left to accomplish.[70]

From these premises it follows that God is immutable and impassible. Aseity entails that God could not act to fulfill a need or enhance his status in any way. It also follows that creatures are simply superfluous to the Purely Actual God. Richard Taylor introduced a notion of "sufficient reason" which suggests that every positive action requires an explanation. Although his cri-

[70] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Question 3, article 8; *Aristotle*, Metaphysics, 9. 1074b–33a. See W. Norris Clarke, *The Philosophical Approach to God: A Neo-Thomist Perspective* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), p. 85.

terion may never be proven, its validity is assumed by the very use of reason. Indeed, unless God acted fortuitously in creating, then Taylor's criteria is reasonable.[71] Consider the problem entailed in the classical idea of perfection:

1. If God possesses aseity and exists, then he is not dependent on anything nor lacking in any conceivable manner (i.e., God is self-sufficient).
2. A self-sufficient being cannot manifest a need nor be enhanced by any positive action (1).
3. Every positive action requires an explanation sufficient to account for it (Criteria of Sufficient Reason).
4. Creation of the cosmos is a positive action.
5. A self-sufficient being could not manifest a reason sufficient to explain why it preferred existence of the cosmos to its nonexistence (1, 2).
6. Hence, God did not create the cosmos (3, 4, 5).

The free-will defense suggests that God created persons out of his love for them in a desire to enter into a genuine relationship with them. Love presupposes, however, an object that exists in some way. If God created persons out of love for them, they must have preexisted (at least in his foreknowledge) and in a mode more real than the manner in which ideas exist in the minds of mortals. Indeed, if God desired our love in response to his, then he manifested a need *essential* to godhood, but clearly a need incompatible with the concept of an absolute being. What consistent meaning can be given to love when applied to a being that cannot respond, that cannot grow in happiness when others do or become sad when others experience sorrow? If God is loving he cannot be, like the Aristotelian and Thomist gods, satisfied with contemplation of his own perfection.

The Greek idea of static, absolute perfection must be replaced with the idea of perfection as a dynamic creativity that acts to enhance the happiness of others, and by so doing enhances its own happiness. As Keith Ward observes, "It is in fact extraordinary that Christian theologians have been so mesmerized by Greek concepts of perfection that they have been unable to develop a more truly Christian idea of God whose revealed nature is love."[72] The requirement that God must be unconditioned to be worthy of worship is unreasonable both because it is incoherent and because the being it describes is not available for religious purposes.

The Mormon Concept of Worship

Faith requires that the object of its hope is minimally sufficient to bring about the realization of the maximally valuable state of affairs. The Mormon God is the adequate object of faith because all individuals, indeed all aspects of reality, look to him for the realization of all that matters most ultimately. The Mormon God is thus the Optimal Actualizer. God makes all things possible,

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[71] Taylor, *Metaphysics*, pp. 103–105.

[72] Keith Ward, *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), p. 85.

but he can make all things actual only by working in conjunction with free individuals and actual entities. Hence, Mormonism does not shy from recognizing humans as cocreators in God's purposes. God needs us and we need him for the realization of all that matters most. We are truly co-laborers, for growth of any nature or realized potential is impossible without him.

The Mormon revelation also recognizes an immanent aspect of God's nature. Mormons refer to God's spirit to explain his influence or creative activity in the world. God stands in relation to his spirit as the sun stands in relation to the light emitted thereby, for it "proceedeth forth from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space" (D&C 88:12). Hence, even though God is confined to space and time by virtue of his corporeal aspect, he nevertheless acts upon and experiences all reality immediately by virtue of his spirit. God sustains the cosmos and has controlling power in the sense that his spirit is manifest in the creative moment of becoming in each actual entity. When his creative influence withdraws, the material universe consumes itself in entropy and individuals atrophy, for his spirit is manifest in the "light which quickeneth your understandings . . . The light which is in all things, which giveth life to all things, which is the law by which all things are governed." [73] Though God cannot determine how free entities will actualize the optimal options offered, without God's continual loving persuasion there are no genuine options. Hence, we properly praise and thank God for sustaining life and promoting personal growth.

The adequate object of worship must possess power sufficient to compensate for the possible eventualities brought about by the free choices of all beings, otherwise God's power and knowledge would be insufficient to insure

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[73] D&C 88:7–13. The Mormon God may be described as a "dipolar deity," or a God who is characterized by two polar aspects in his attributes. It is quite consistent to describe him as a personal identity characterized by a corporeal aspect that is concrete, temporal, relative, and truly actual while also admitting that he has an immanent aspect that is abstract, eternal, omnipresent, and immediate. Process philosophy has championed a dipolar concept of deity. See Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology*, pp. 47–48. The dipolar concept of God explains how God is one yet many. While he possesses a distinguishing personality, his nature does not exclude others from participating in his experience of all reality and promoting his purposes in a joint act of creation. In a very real way, he is in us and we in him, for our very experience of existence is mutually dependent. The Mormon God thus optimally or perfectly influences and is influenced by all reality. As Truman Madsen is fond of saying, "He is the Most Moved Mover." Such a notion of God entails that those actual entities that perfectly reflect his influence will participate as one in his experience and purposes, and God's dynamic experience grows towards a fullness as his creations enhance their enjoyment. Though any exegesis of Mormon scripture is tentative, it appears consistent with the Mormon revelation of God to consider the immanent aspect of God's spirit as eternal rather than emergent in time, and God's corporeal or concrete aspect as emergent through time rather than eternal. For the same light that is through all things and that quickeneth all things is "intelligence, or the light of truth, [which] was not created or made, neither indeed can be. . . . The glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth" (D&C 88:11–12, 17; 93:29, 36). Hence, the Mormon belief that God was once as man now is may mean that God once stood in relation to time and space as man now does, even as Jesus did, but was always very God in spirit or participation in divine experience and purpose. I may be guilty here, however, of reading Whitehead into Mormon scripture. See James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), pp. 220–23; Parley P. Pratt, *The Key to Theology*, p. 43.

the realization of His purposes. The Mormon plan of salvation, following the Anselmian satisfaction theory, is just such a provision, compensating for the free choices of Adam (humankind) by meeting the eternal requirements of justice and mercy through the atonement of Christ. Though God is conditioned by eternal principles, he utilizes other eternal laws and principles to nullify their effect without contravening their efficacy, analogous to the way a jet utilizes natural laws to lift tons of steel into the atmosphere, overcoming the natural law of gravity without revoking it. Hence, God is an invincible ally who can insure the realization of his purposes. This has always been the Mormon understanding of God's omnipotence and miracles.[74]

It should be noted that this concept of power appropriately places the emphasis on God as the object of religious worship and faith, for the point is not his unlimited power and knowledge, but his purpose and love. God need only possess power and knowledge sufficient to save, exalt, and insure the eternal lives of those who trust in him. His knowledge and power certainly exceed this minimal requirement, but he is not thereby a more adequate object of faith. Indeed, the classical definitions of timeless omniscience and unlimited power are quite irrelevant to one aspiring to understand his relationship to deity. Religious faith is more a function of intimacy than of ultimacy, more a product of relationships than of logical necessities. That is why faith in God should make all the difference in the world.

Some may object to the entire attempt to understand the adequate object of faith because the absolute transcends all of our categories of thought. For many, to be mystified is to be edified and a God understood is a God unthroned. There is something dishonest, however, about a theology which maintains that *reason* demands an absolute being as the adequate object of faith, yet commits treason against reason whenever it speaks of God. God is not a more adequate object of faith simply because we attach to him contradictory notions of power, knowledge, timelessness, and aseity — adding nonsense to religious awe. In fact, if God is a total mystery then we could never have any idea about the type of being it is, including whether it is an adequate object of faith. As David Hume's Cleanthes contended, "Religion would be better served were it to rest contented with more accurate and more moderate expressions. The terms *admirable, excellent, superlatively great, wise and holy* — these sufficiently fill the imaginations of men, and anything beyond, besides that it leads to absurdities, has no influence on the affections or sentiments. . . . If we abandon all human analogy . . . I am afraid we abandon all religion and retain no conception of the great object of our devotion." [75]

In this sense, a finite God is uniquely worthy of worship. According to Peter Appleby, "If God's goodness is radically different from human goodness, there is little reason for calling it goodness at all, and still less for praising it as faith is wont to do. The child who is totally ignorant of his parent's values has

[74] Paulsen, *Comparative Coherency*, p. 23.

[75] Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, p. 71; italics in original.

no reason for admiring them, and still less for trying to emulate them." [78] If the purpose of theology is to help mortals understand their relationship to God and the meaning of their experience in the world which surrounds them, then the least satisfying theology would be one that precludes a relationship between God and man, or which takes refuge in mystery when confronted with human existence and our experience of evil.

The problem entailed in prayer to a finite being while worshipping absolute being is not exclusively Mormon; rather, it is a question which Christianity in general must face. The only truly absolute being is a pantheistic being, the identification of God with whatever is real. Although Judeo-Christians have pushed their concept of God as close to pantheism as possible to insure the absolute status of God, they nevertheless shun pantheism in name because it contravenes the teaching of Hebrew scripture that God is distinct from the world and socially involved with humans. Christians have insisted that God is personal yet possesses none of the characteristics common to persons. They have insisted that he is absolute, but not quite *that* absolute. They have asserted that God is both personal and absolute yet what they propose is neither personal nor absolute. Therefore, Judeo-Christian theology fails to meet its own criteria of the adequate object of worship, for such a being is not the greatest conceivable being. In fact, it is not even a coherently conceivable being. Orthodox theologians must abandon their theology when they kneel to address deity, and they must abandon the deity they pray to when they speak of theology. The acceptance of two mutually exclusive ideas has led to a dilemma in logic: A god that is both conditioned and unconditioned, related and unrelated, temporal and timeless. If Mormon Christianity is to remain true to its early Hebrew and Christian roots, its theology must be of a personal and therefore finite God who makes a difference in human experience.

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[78] Peter Appleby, "Finitist Theology and the Problem of Evil," *Sunstone* (Nov./Dec. 1981): 53.